

Brief Summary of the Status of the Great Indian One-Horned Rhinoceros

BY

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The overall outlook for the Great Indian One-horned Rhinoceros presently appears to be better than at any time during recent years. Nevertheless the preservation of this species is fraught with numerous problems. Chief among these are overgrazing by domestic livestock, human encroachment or exploitation of its few remaining habitats, and poaching. Although there are frequent reports of rhino in areas outside established sanctuaries or reserved forests, particularly in Assam, it is my firm belief that these scattered animals contribute little to the preservation of this species. Only strictly protected and managed sanctuaries or reserves offer reasonable possibilities for preserving, maintaining, or increasing the numbers of Indian rhino presently in existence.

The 166-square-mile Kaziranga Wild Life Sanctuary in Assam was censused on 18 and 19 March 1966. Four hundred or well over half of the Great Indian One-horned Rhinoceros in existence are harboured in this outstanding sanctuary. It also offers better possibilities of maintaining relatively high numbers of rhino than any other area in its present range. However, problems confronting the rhino in Kaziranga include poaching, erosion by the annual flood waters of the Brahmaputra River, and to some extent grazing by domestic livestock.

The Forest Department reports that there are over 40 rhino in the 26-square-mile Laokhowa Reserve in Assam. However, it is doubtful that under present conditions this population will even be able to maintain itself, let alone increase in numbers. Poaching does not appear to be a major problem in Laokhowa. But, besides extensive crop cultivation and forest exploitation, the entire reserve is severely abused by overgrazing by domestic livestock and excessive disturbances caused by numerous people residing in the area. The seven rhino reported for Kukurata actually reside outside of the reserve in about a mile-square grassland area along the Brahmaputra River. In addition to being in an exceptionally vulnerable position in so far as poaching is concerned, these rhino must move elsewhere during the annual flood season when the area that they inhabit is completely inundated.

I did not visit the 7-square-mile Raja Mayang nor the 22-square-mile Orang reserved forests. The figures given in the Table below for these areas are based upon information received from Mr. P. C. Gogoi (Nowgong Divisional Forest Officer) and the Range Officer stationed at Orang. Mr. E. P. Gee's estimates for the 105-square-mile Manas or North Kamrup Wild Life Sanctuary and the 85-square-mile Sona Rupa Reserve are also given. These estimates, as well as those given for elsewhere in Assam, are based primarily upon information obtained from others. Therefore, I am not in a position to state the actual status of the rhino in these areas.

The 38-square-mile Jaldapara Wild Life Sanctuary in northern West Bengal was censused on 26 April 1966. Although only 32 rhino were tallied during the census, based upon my observations between March 31 and April 7, I am certain that the sanctuary contains at least 50 rhino. Poaching of rhino does not appear to be excessive in Jaldapara, but the illegal grazing of domestic livestock and forest exploitation by villagers living along the boundaries are major problems. In spite of these disturbances, I observed a relatively large proportion of young and the sanctuary's rhino population appears to be thriving. Five rhino are also reported to inhabit the near-by Goru Mara Sanctuary.

The outlook for the preservation of the Great Indian One-horned Rhinoceros in Nepal was very bleak until just recently when the Forest Department and the Government of Nepal took definitive measures to protect this threatened species. The distribution of the rhino in Nepal is restricted to Chitawan or the Rapti River Valley and a few of the near-by tributaries. Although considered until recently as royal game, King Mahendra has extended full protection to the rhino in his country, A Wild Life Management Division under the supervision of Major N. R. Thapa, consisting of over 100 'rhino guards', has also been established primarily for the protection of the rhino. The Forest Department's official total for rhino in Nepal is 185. However, based upon my limited observations between April 9 and 23, and discussions with people inhabiting the principal rhino areas, I believe there are probably fewer than 100 in the country. The most important factor, however, is not the exact number, but the steps being taken by the Government and the Forest Department for the protection of those that are present. The major problems presently confronting rhino in Nepal are overgrazing by domestic livestock and sporadic forays by poachers crossing the Indo-Nepal border.

Estimates for total populations of the Great Indian One-horned Rhinoceros throughout its present range are given below.

TABLE

ESTIMATES OF GREAT INDIAN ONE-HORNED RHINOCEROS, JUNE 1966

Assam	(1) Kaziranga	..	400
	(2) Laokhowa	..	40
	(3) Kukurata	..	7
	(4) Raja Mayang	..	6
	(5) Orang	..	12
	(6) Manas	..	15*
	(7) Sona Rupa	..	5*
	(8) Elsewhere	..	40
West Bengal	(1) Jaldapara	..	50
	(2) Goru Mara	..	5*
Nepal		..	100
	Total	..	<u>680</u>

* Mr. Gee's figures.